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North Korean Military Capabilities and Intentions

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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NORTH KOREAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND INTENTIONS

Information available as of 15 May 1979
was used in the preparation of this Estimate

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THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS, EXCEPT AS NOTED IN THE TEXT.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State and Defense, and the National Security Agency.

Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

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KEY JUDGMENTS

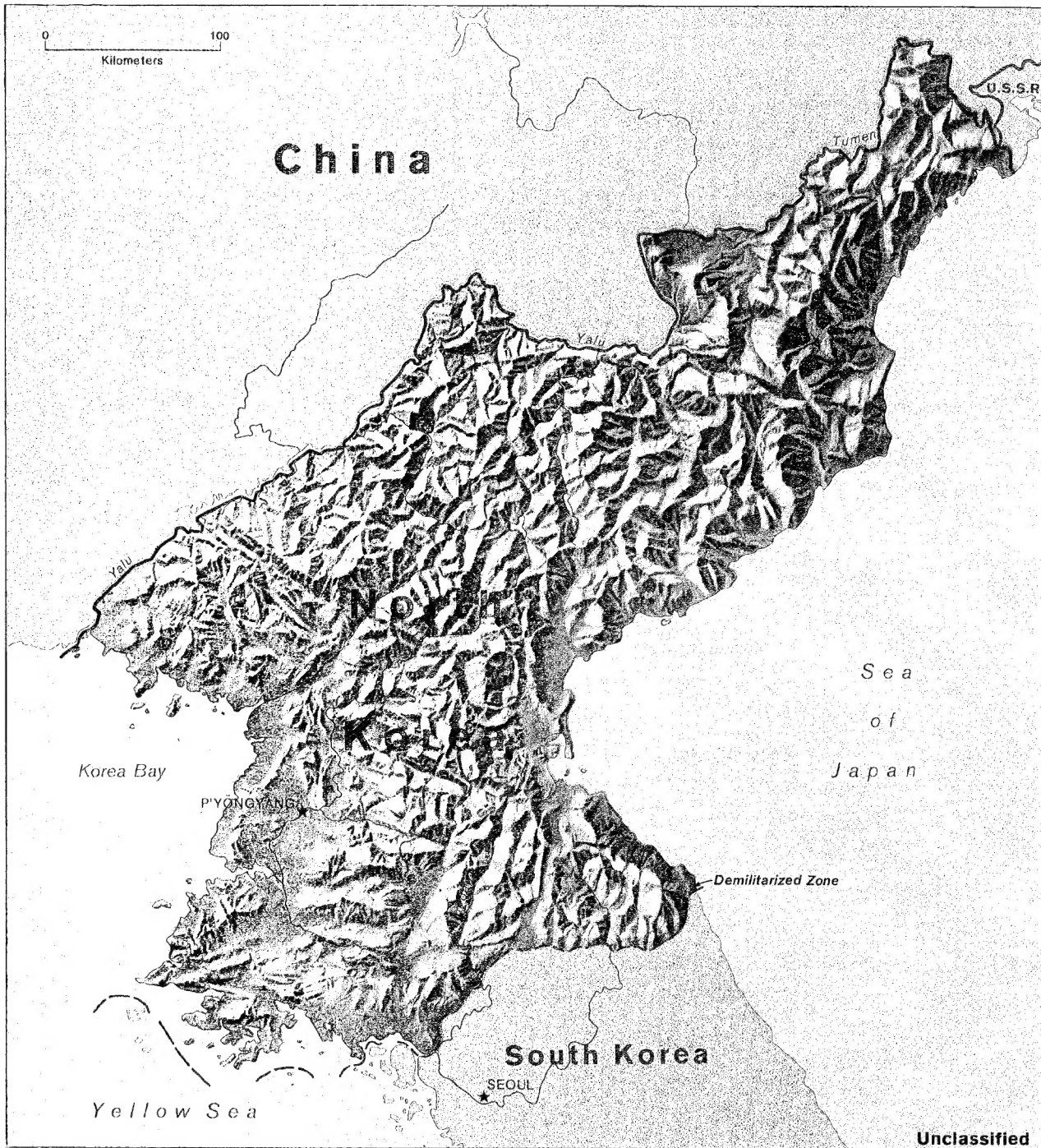
North Korea's overriding goal remains the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under its control. The modernization and growth of the North Korean armed forces over the past decade, together with an extensive buildup of the defense industries, have greatly enhanced the North's military capabilities and have provided Pyongyang with a greater range of military options for reunification if it chooses to exercise them.

North Korea, with little warning, could now attack South Korea with a force of 25 or so infantry divisions. This is at least 20 percent larger than the estimates by the Intelligence Community two years ago. Over the past decade, moreover, the North Korean Army has greatly improved its overall firepower, and individual infantry divisions now have about twice the major weapons firepower they possessed 10 years ago.

We believe the North Korean leaders are deterred from launching major hostilities by the US commitment to defend South Korea, by the presence of US forces in the South, by the relative stability of the South Korean Government, by the strength of the South Korean military forces, and by the desire of the Chinese and Soviets to maintain the status quo.

There are developments, however, which could substantially alter this judgment. If North Korea saw opportunities stemming from an erosion of the present elements of deterrence, or if it became alarmed by a reversal of the military trends that have been running in its favor throughout the decade, it might be tempted to adopt a more aggressive policy. We doubt that either Moscow or Beijing could veto North Korean military action. While we do not foresee any of those developments leading to a North Korean attack, the significant improvement in North Korea's military capabilities and widening of options make the situation far more sensitive and thus far more dangerous. In particular, we believe President Kim Il-song's perception of the US security commitment will continue to be the key factor in determining North Korean actions.

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DISCUSSION

Military Buildup

1. The North Korean armed forces have grown dramatically over the past decade, particularly the ground forces. In 1970, we estimated that the North Korean Army numbered about 360,000 troops and was organized into 24 infantry divisions and brigades and one armor division. Today, all elements of the US Intelligence Community are reasonably confident that the North Korean Army numbers about 600,000 troops and has two armor divisions and no fewer than 30 infantry divisions and five infantry brigades, or their equivalents.¹ On the basis of their own analyses, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, and the Director, National Security Agency, believe the North Korean Army consists of 41 combat divisions and infantry brigades, and the US Army analysis further concludes that North Korean ground force strength may approach 700,000. The differing views as to the numbers of divisions and brigades result chiefly from differing interpretations of a complicated body of evidence.²

2. Not only has there been an increase in the number of divisions and brigades, but there has been an increase in capability and mobility. Overall ground force firepower has been considerably upgraded through the addition of more and better weapons and

¹ The North Koreans appear to apply the term "infantry brigade" to a unit larger than a regiment but smaller than a division. Brigades have an assessed strength ranging from 3,000 to 9,000 men, and they lack some of the division's fire support. In most cases, infantry brigades seem to be interim units which are in the process of being built up to divisions.

equipment such as tanks, armored personnel carriers (APCs), towed and self-propelled artillery, and multiple rocket launchers. Each infantry division has about twice the major weapons firepower that it had in 1970. The formation of a second armor division and the substantial mechanization of two infantry divisions have given the North Korean ground forces greatly increased mobility.

3. The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, believes that the battalion count more accurately shows the increase in North Korean ground combat power. Using his total of ground forces, he calculates that between 1970 and 1978 the North Korean Army increased its number of combat maneuver (tank, infantry, and ranger/commando) battalions about 55 percent, from about 430 to at least 670; and its firepower (field artillery and multiple rocket launcher) battalions nearly 90 percent, from about 175 to at least 329. The Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency believe the number of maneuver and firepower battalions is somewhat lower.

4. During the 1970s, the North Koreans also reorganized the command structure of the Army, probably to facilitate control over the larger forces. Two new conventional army corps evidently have been formed, for a total of nine such corps in the country.

5. We also have evidence of a more offensive military posture. The North Korean Army has tripled its river-crossing equipment. This river-crossing capability is not necessary for the defense of the North. It would, however, facilitate a major attack along the most direct route to Seoul, where the Imjin River poses a formidable obstacle. The North Koreans have significantly enlarged their ranger/commando and other elite forces. We currently estimate that these units contain as many as 100,000 well-trained troops, an unusually high proportion of such troops relative to other major armies. Ranger/commando forces are formed for offensive operations, and the North has the capacity to insert some 5,000 troops deep into South Korea in a one-time lift by light transports, helicopters, and naval fast landing craft. The others could be used in conjunction with conventional forces. Since 1971

the North Koreans have been digging tunnels to establish infiltration routes and covert avenues of approach under the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Though we have exposed and neutralized three of these tunnels—the latest exposure was in 1978—the North Koreans continue to dig them. We regard these tunnels as part of an offensive strategy.

6. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We anticipate that these studies will enhance our understanding of the organization, capabilities, and interaction of the ground forces. They will enable us to refine further our estimates of the size of the armed forces. According to the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, these studies could result in estimates of even larger forces and greater North Korean military capabilities. CIA and DIA believe that the listed studies will have little effect on the key judgments made in this Estimate.

7. The North Korean Air Force has grown throughout the decade. It has increased its jet combat aircraft from 570 in 1970 to some 700 today, but gains in recent years have consisted of models older and less sophisticated than the aircraft the United States has provided to South Korea. The NKAF has 21 fields capable of handling these aircraft (17 occupied), and now is constructing three new airfields. It also has 25 transport-capable airfields (seven occupied) and 17 highway strips. Since 1970, the North has tripled the number of surface-to-air missile (SAM) launchers, quadrupled the number of antiaircraft (AA) guns, added improved interceptors with a limited all-weather capability, vastly improved its radar coverage, and developed an integrated interceptor, SAM, and AA gun air defense system that covers virtually the entire country. The North Koreans, however, still lack modern, mobile battlefield air defense systems to protect advancing ground forces.

8. North Korean naval expansion has also been impressive. The Navy has increased the numbers of its combatants from 120 to 360 and its landing craft by about 100 to a total of 115. It has progressed from an almost purely coastal defense force to one with a capability for antishipping, amphibious raiding, and mining operations in South Korean waters, albeit on a limited scale. The Navy has also constructed new bases.

9. We currently estimate the total personnel strength of the North Korean armed forces at about 680,000. This includes some 600,000 personnel in the Army, about 47,000 in the Air Force, and 31,000 in the Navy. Basing his judgment on the belief that the strength of the North Korean Army approaches 700,000, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, puts total armed forces strength at close to 780,000. Our higher estimate of the size of North Korean forces—as compared with two years ago—does not result from a recent surge in growth, but rather reflects steady growth and more comprehensive analysis of available data.

10. The North Koreans have increased the sophistication and scale of their military training during the past decade. They are conducting more ground/air and naval/air exercises. The Air Force has increased its training in offensive bombing and strafing. The Navy and Air Force capabilities for extended operations are enhanced by patrols of the 50-mile military and 200-mile economic sea zones. Military training using replicas of defensive barriers and positions, as well as key urban areas, in South Korea has increased in North Korea.

11. Along with the military buildup, there has been growth in defense industries, giving the North Koreans greater independence from their military allies. In the early 1970s, China and the USSR promoted the North Korean military buildup by providing military equipment and technical assistance. Both sent considerable numbers of tanks, APCs, and aircraft to North Korea, and the Soviets supplied large numbers of SAM systems. Notable among the several projects involving technical aid are the tank plant built with Soviet assistance and the submarine production yard built with Chinese help. The North Koreans now manufacture medium tanks, APCs, self-propelled and towed field and AA artillery, multiple rocket launchers, submarines and other naval craft, and most of their own ammunition. North Korea must still depend on other nations for aircraft, missiles, optics, and sophisticated electronics. Since North Korea is now exporting weapons to Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, we surmise that its own armed forces suffer no serious equipment shortages—at least in the export items.

12. The North Koreans have also made a massive effort to minimize the vulnerability of their military forces and defense industries through hardening. They have built underground facilities sufficient to house all of their bomber and fighter aircraft, and a large

portion of their naval forces is similarly protected. Likewise, hardening provides protection for vital components of SAM and AA artillery systems, armor, artillery, and other ground force elements. At least 28 industrial plants, 14 of which do military work, have some underground facilities.

13. The heaviest concentration of North Korean forces is still along the DMZ, with additional units—including most of the newly discovered units—positioned along both coasts and around Pyongyang. Such deployment provides defense against an attack from the coasts or from the south, but well over half of North Korea's major units are deployed south of the capital and most of the rest are located along direct lines of communication to the south. From these positions the North Koreans could mass sufficient forces for an offensive with little warning.

14. We now believe that North Korea could mount and sustain a much more powerful attack against the South than we estimated two years ago, because North Korea has more infantry divisions or brigades, more ranger/commando units, and more tanks, artillery pieces, and multiple rocket launchers. Even if North Korea chose to retain half of the newly identified infantry divisions or brigades for strategic reserve or rear-area security duties, there would be close to 25 infantry divisions or brigades available—an increase of at least 20 percent over the 21 previously believed to be available—for attack under worst case scenarios developed by the Intelligence Community two years ago. The North Koreans have sufficient capacity to store enough oil to sustain military operations for several months. Although our evidence is not conclusive, we believe the North has sufficient stockpiles of other critical supplies to sustain military operations for at least 30 days.

Current Trends

15. In the late 1960s, the North Korean authorities decided to strengthen their armed forces significantly. This effort, undertaken with some secrecy, required great sacrifice and was instrumental in the substantial retardation of economic growth throughout the 1970s. North Korea now has about 4 percent of its population³ in the regular armed forces and may be devoting about 20 percent of its gross national product to defense, [redacted]

³ We have used a population figure of 19 million, the estimate of the Foreign Demographic Division of the US Department of Commerce.

[redacted] These rates are clearly among the highest in the world.

16. There is evidence that the quantitative expansion of North Korea's ground combat forces is not yet finished. Several units in the force lack elements found in the standard table of organization. We judge, however, that the growth rate has slowed.

17. North Korean defense industries show no evidence of slowing the production of ground force weapons for force modernization. Towed artillery, self-propelled guns and antiaircraft artillery, and multiple rocket launchers continue to be turned out and added to the forces. The North Korean plant engaged in the series production of medium tanks recently switched from copies of T-55s to T-62 types.

18. Soviet deliveries of fighter aircraft stopped in 1974, while the Chinese continue to send older-model but newly produced fighters, bombers, and helicopters. Although the North Koreans now have almost twice as many combat aircraft as the South, few of their fighters can match the newer US-built aircraft now in the South's Air Force. About 40 North Korean pilots are currently training on advanced MIG-21s in Libya, however, and another 40 may be receiving basic ground training on MIG-23 aircraft with Soviet instructors. If so, the Soviets may intend ultimately to provide North Korea with such aircraft.

19. Naval expansion appears to be slowing after more than tripling the number of ships and craft since 1970. The number of submarines and fast landing craft in particular increased during the 1970s through domestic production. It now appears, however, that the North Koreans are about to cease submarine production and have slowed the manufacture of fast landing craft as well as patrol, torpedo, and fire-support ships.

20. North Korea may be reaching a point where the economy and the population can no longer support major increases in military forces and expenditures. Because of the long leadtime of military programs, it is possible that a decision to slow the military buildup was made by about 1976. In that case, we would only now begin to see the results of such a slowdown. Evidence which suggests the Koreans have slowed down includes a shift in emphasis from naval to

⁴ We estimate the North Korean GNP to be approximately 20 billion won (a little over \$11 billion) and the defense expenditures to be about 4 billion won (a little over \$2 billion). The defense estimate was derived from the 1971 published military budget revised upward.

merchant ship construction and less investment in new defense industry.

North Korean Forces By 1982

21. By 1982 we expect the North Korean military forces will be better equipped and trained, though probably not significantly larger in manpower than they are today.

22. In the ground forces, the North Koreans probably will flesh out incomplete infantry units and upgrade some brigades to divisions. By 1982 they could add about four more divisions and brigades if they continue at their present pace of improvement. We see little evidence pointing toward the formation of additional armor or mechanized divisions. The North Koreans will add T-62-type medium tanks, self-propelled artillery, and improved multiple rocket launchers to the forces, although these weapons may not significantly swell inventories of the active forces because some will be used to replace worn and obsolete weapons.

23. The North Koreans may be able to develop weapons such as a more advanced antitank guided missile or a tactical surface-to-surface missile, but we do not anticipate any technological breakthroughs to enable them to produce sophisticated equipment such as long-range missiles, modern electronics, or mobile air defense missile systems. The North Koreans lack such equipment and have had little if any success in acquiring it from the Soviet Union or other outside sources. In recent years, the USSR has been cautious about providing North Korea with modern military equipment, but we cannot be sure that this policy will continue.

24. The Air Force will probably not be any larger in 1982 than it is now but may improve qualitatively. Improvements will depend largely on the USSR. Even if the Chinese were able to fully utilize West European technology to modernize their military forces, they would not be able by 1982 to match the quality of aircraft, missiles, and associated equipment that the United States now is supplying to the South Koreans. In the past, the Soviets have been reluctant to provide such equipment to the North Koreans, but if they are supporting the North Korean training in Libya, such support could indicate a shift in their position. The North Korean receipt of advanced MIGs, particularly MIG-23s, would significantly reduce South Korea's current qualitative edge in modern aircraft and would

make the North's overall numerical advantage much more important.

25. We believe that the North Korean Navy will change little by 1982. The composition of the fleets probably will remain about the same because nearly half the units now in service are less than five years old, and the relatively small number of vessels under construction includes few new types.

North Korean Intentions

26. A complex set of factors, domestic as well as foreign, almost certainly contributed to North Korea's decision to expand its ground forces. President Kim Il-song and other North Korean leaders regard the Army—apart from its military mission—as a political instrument to promote domestic stability and economic development. The interests of the military thus receive high priority. The proximity of large opposing forces along the DMZ places a premium on military preparedness as well—a theme North Korean propaganda has perennially reinforced by citing the dangers from the South. Moreover, Kim has repeatedly stressed the need for the country to defend itself without outside assistance. Even so, these factors, while unquestionably important, are not sufficient to explain the magnitude of North Korea's defense program.

27. Rather North Korea's military buildup is consistent with an overall reunification strategy which President Kim Il-song has outlined publicly in major policy addresses over the years. Kim has called for a three-pronged approach by strengthening the North as a revolutionary base for reunification, promoting the growth of revolutionary forces in South Korea, and working to gain support from other revolutionary forces around the world. Kim Il-song has effectively subordinated all of North Korea's domestic and foreign policies to the overriding goal of national reunification under North Korean control.

28. North Korea has adopted various tactics to reach this goal. The major initiatives were the commando raids against the South in the late 1960s, the political dialogue with Seoul in the early 1970s, and the North's diplomatic offensives in the mid-1970s, which aimed at marshaling support for Pyongyang's reunification formula among the nonaligned countries and within the United Nations.

29. The government of Kim Il-song has pursued goals other than reunification over the years, including consolidating and maintaining its political authority within North Korea, striving for greater freedom of

action from Beijing and Moscow, and promoting economic development. There have been some signs in the past year or so that the goal of economic growth in the North may be taking on a higher priority than in the past. The North has recently shown a less hostile public posture and has engaged in a brief round of talks with South Korea. These developments at least raise the possibility that Pyongyang is considering a shift to a longer term and more moderate approach to reunification.

30. We believe, however, that North Korea's recent, more moderate behavior is designed at least in part to facilitate the withdrawal of US troops and help correct economic shortcomings. Pyongyang made similar demonstrations of flexibility in the early 1970s, at the same time that it was engaged in its military buildup. Indeed, the large cost of the North's buildup, which has been undertaken at the expense of Pyongyang's economic and social programs, strongly suggests that reunification has remained its overriding national goal in the 1970s.

31. Several factors may have contributed to the North Koreans' desire to build up their forces and increase their options during the 1970s. On the one hand, the enunciation of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 and the announcement of the start of US troop withdrawals in 1970 may have caused the North Koreans to conclude that the United States would have completed a ground force withdrawal by the middle of the decade. At the same time, however, the US pledge to provide large-scale assistance to build up and modernize South Korea's armed forces may have suggested to the North Koreans that they faced the possibility of falling behind the South militarily. Finally, Pyongyang's major allies were moving into closer relationships with the United States, a fact which may have persuaded the North Koreans that they could no longer rely on their allies for full support.

32. North Korea's enhanced capabilities have provided it with a greater range of military options. Among these options are a major offensive aimed at the rapid seizure of the Seoul area or of all of South Korea. We see little evidence, however, that North Korea is preparing to exercise a military option against the South in the near term. We believe the North Koreans are restrained by several considerations. These are the US defense commitment, the presence of US forces in South Korea, South Korean military capabilities, political conditions in the South, and the attitude of the other major powers in the area.

33. We believe the US security commitment and presence of US military forces in South Korea weigh most heavily in North Korean calculations. Kim probably has not made any lasting judgment about the US security commitment; rather he is more likely to assess that question in light of future developments. North Korea reacted favorably, albeit cautiously, to Washington's decision in early 1977 to withdraw US ground combat forces from South Korea. Over the years, one of Pyongyang's key objectives has been to end the entire US military presence in Korea. Despite its growing doubts that the United States will withdraw, North Korea has avoided any confrontation that might delay withdrawal.

34. North Korean leaders are almost certainly aware of their military advantages over the South. Although we do not know the calculus by which they would determine the ratio of forces necessary for a successful attack, we believe that they would overestimate their needs rather than risk underestimating them. The North Korean leaders are equally aware of major force improvements being carried out or planned by Seoul, but probably believe that the South cannot redress the imbalance in the next few years.

35. To unify the peninsula, Kim Il-song has consistently stressed the need for the creation of a revolutionary situation in the South, but he probably recognizes that he has little ability to influence events there from within. Moreover, Pyongyang probably views the South Korean Government as generally stable and believes that massive unrest is unlikely in the near future.

36. In the past, China and the USSR have demonstrated little enthusiasm for Kim Il-song's efforts to reunify the Korean Peninsula. For reasons of their own, both the Chinese and the Soviets have had an important stake in maintaining the Korean status quo. A war in Korea could create serious complications in their relations with the United States, could stimulate major changes in Japanese security policy, and could even affect the overall power balance in East Asia.

37. Still, the extent to which China or the Soviet Union can restrain North Korea is limited. North Korea's growing military self-sufficiency has reduced its need to seek outside military assistance before initiating action and during the early days of combat. If President Kim became convinced that conditions were favorable for a quick military victory, we doubt that either Moscow or Beijing could veto the venture. Both would be loath to support a war on the peninsula,

but they could be drawn in, particularly if the North Korean regime appeared to be losing. President Kim might assume that his security agreement with both countries would ensure their entry into a conflict if North Korea were endangered, because neither of his allies wants to see a pro-Western government replacing the Communist regime in Pyongyang.

38. So long as the North Koreans see that events on the peninsula are moving in the direction of reducing the US military presence in South Korea, they are likely to press their case through diplomatic and political means. There are, however, developments which could substantially alter the North Koreans' perception.

39. As we have seen, relations between the major powers have special significance in Korea. A notable increase in friction between the United States and either the Soviet Union or China could encourage North Korea to become more adventurous. Similarly, a deepening of competition between the USSR and China could induce either country to increase its support for the Kim Il-song regime, and this development, too, could cause the North Korean Government to become more adventurous.

40. Kim Il-song may already have calculated that his military advantages will erode as South Korea more fully translates its economic strength into an improved military capability, thereby reversing the military trends that have run in North Korea's favor throughout much of this decade. Kim Il-song may thus conclude that time is running out and that the only realistic alternative to a permanently divided Korea is forceful reunification.

41. The emergence of political instability in the South—with or without the presence of US forces—would prompt a basic review of policy in Pyongyang. President Kim has publicly declared that the North would not “stand by with folded arms” in such an event. Further, the North would find most tempting political instability stemming from frictions in US-South Korean relations. Such instability—should it affect the North's perception of the US security guarantee—would be the single most dangerous development in terms of inducing a North Korean attack.

Outlook

42. In summary, we see a North Korean military buildup that exceeds defensive requirements. The rate of the buildup has slowed substantially over the past two years, but we expect qualitative improvements to continue. Although we have little direct insight into North Korean intentions, we believe the purpose of the buildup has been to give North Korean leaders the capability to unify the peninsula through force. North Korea is now deterred from using military force, but developments encouraging a more aggressive policy may emerge. In particular, we believe President Kim's perception of the US security commitment will continue to be the key factor in determining North Korea actions. While we do not now foresee any of these developments leading to a North Korean attack, the significant improvement in North Korea's military capabilities and the widening of options make the situation far more sensitive and thus far more dangerous.

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